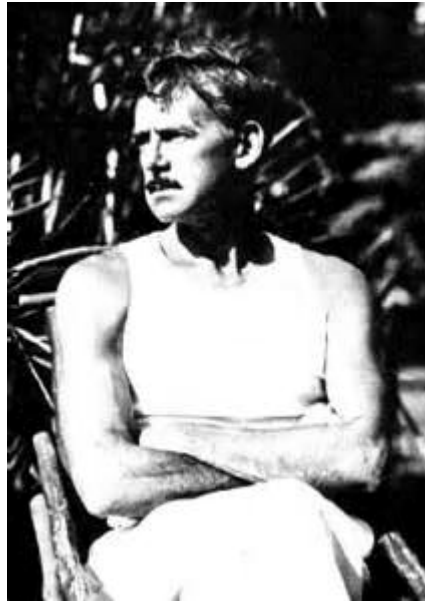


ANALYSIS

Long Day's Journey into Night (1956)



Eugene O'Neill

(1888-1953)

“One of the most moving plays I have ever seen.”

T. S. Eliot

“The finest play written in English in my lifetime.”

Brendan Gill, critic

“Long Day's Journey into Night is a long-awaited posthumous play written by O'Neill in 1940 and withheld from the public for many years because of the delicate nature of its subject matter—the bitter domestic conflicts of O'Neill's own family. The chief characters are James Tyrone, an aging Irish-American actor; his wife Mary; James Jr. ('Jamie'), their elder son, and Edmund (based on the character of the author himself), the younger brother. The action adheres close to the classic unities, taking place on a single day in 1912 and confining itself entirely to the living room of the Tyrones' summer home.

The play opens with the family conducting what is evidently a typical good-humored Irish family quarrel, but as the action proceeds the real truth is revealed: that the family is built on rottenness and deceit, and is rapidly degenerating. Mary, who as a girl was religiously inclined and dreamed of becoming a nun, regrets the irregular life of her marriage with Tyrone and longs for a decent and conventional home; through her bitterness she has gradually become a morphine addict. Jamie is a drunkard and libertine who out of sheer cynicism has encouraged his younger brother to follow in his footsteps, and Edmund, a would-be writer, is seriously ill from a combination of consumption and over-drinking. Tyrone, the father, is gradually revealed to be a histrionic and self-dramatizing windbag dominated by a single obsession: to acquire property and assure the security of his old age. His avarice has actually ruined the lives of all the others; when Edmund was born he economized on a cheap doctor for his wife, and it was this doctor who started her on the drug habit. Likewise his reluctance to spend money on doctors for Edmund has led his son into a serious illness.

Yet this wreck of a family, each member continually deceiving and undermining the others, is held together by a fierce irrational affection which is stronger than their hatred; in their clearer and saner

moments they realize their love for each other and regret their hasty and cruel outbursts. As the play ends, Mary, who had temporarily been considered cured, relapses hopelessly into a narcotic insanity again, unable to comprehend that her son is probably dying of tuberculosis.

Long Day's Journey into Night was evidently conceived by O'Neill as part of an involved cycle of plays which in their entirety were to comprise a sort of dramatic autobiography. Two other plays fit into this cycle of material: *The Iceman Cometh* (1946) and *A Moon for the Misbegotten* (1952). The first of these, set in a sordid New York bar and peopled with characters reminiscent of the philosophical bums of Gorky's *The Lower Depths*, achieved a modest success on Broadway; the other is a study of the final disintegration of James Tyrone, Jr., or Jamie."

Donald Heiney
Recent American Literature 4
(Barron's Educational Series 1958) 351-52

"If O'Neill was nihilistic in his views, and Bohemian in some of his conduct, he was not disorderly in his work. Indeed, his work spelled order for him, just as it spelled somewhat better mental health. *The Iceman Cometh* and *Long Day's Journey*, prompted to some extent by the outbreak of World War II, were island of order in the sea of personal and more than personal chaos.

Long Day's Journey is a kind of classical quartet. Here O'Neill eschews the luxury of numerous minor characters, crowds, and a bustle of stage activity. He has a few people and they talk. This has given the public an impression of shapelessness. O'Neill's latest biographer says: 'The play is essentially plotless... the deliberate formlessness of it all is enervating. Still, it is a dramatic achievement of the first order...' A biographer—in this case at least—is not a critic, or one might ask him how a piece of enervating formlessness can be a dramatic achievement of the first order.

Long Day's Journey is a dramatic achievement which at first glance *seems* formless. Later, one discovers the form. The play has the outward calm and formality—not formlessness!—of French classical tragedies. Like them—and like *The Iceman*—it observes the unities. The form reveals itself in the interrelationship of people. The principle relationship here (dramaturgically speaking at least) is that between Edmund and his mother. The classical dramatist has to pull together on one day events which in actuality happened over a longer period.

O'Neill found his action and his drama in the—presumably fictitious—coincidence of Mary's final relapse into drug addiction with the discovery of Edmund's tuberculosis. But a situation is only a premise of drama, not its realization. Before we have drama, the situation must move, and the dramatist must have discovered what makes it move. In *Long Day's Journey*, Edmund has come to the point where he needs his mother very much. He is moving toward her. And only a short while ago he would have had a chance. But she has now relapsed, with an obvious finality, into drug addiction. She too is moving. She is moving away from Edmund, away from everyone. She is moving to the point—reached during the play as its culmination—where no one can reach her any more. That Mary moves away just when Edmund moves toward her is—in terms of dynamics—what makes possible the play and enables O'Neill to rescue it from 'formlessness.'

Admittedly, this is to speak only of two of the four main characters. Before the play is over we have got inside each of the four. As people, James, Sr., and James, Jr., may be just as salient: in the dramatic structure, as I see it, they are subordinated to Mary and Edmund because the action turns on the question, what is happening to the latter pair?

Sincerity has done far more for O'Neill in this drama than ambition could ever do for him in the 'big' plays of the second period. In the handling of ambivalence, for example. Had it ever really been necessary to invent devices to show the phenomenon? The method O'Neill used in the later play was to work through to his feelings, and then let them speak. It is the hard kind of sincerity. And he must surely have been gratified to see how—under this dispensation—a character can turn from expressing his hate to expressing love without any kind of device at all. It 'just happens'...

The deeply human thing about this often inhuman artist, Eugene O'Neill, is his concern to be forgiven—and to be capable of forgiving. The absence of catharsis is a notable, and ugly, feature of the 'big' plays. As Engel has put it, instead of catharsis, O'Neill proposes narcosis or necrosis. Not that even *Long Day's Journey* ends with anyone on stage actually forgiving anyone. Their journey is truly into night, not into love, but the dignity of the ending lies in what is *not* said. There throbs in the final speech that sense of an alternative, that sense of having lived and of having deserved to live, which I deplored the absence of in the 'big' plays."

Eric Bentley
Major Writers of America II
(Harcourt 1962) 570-71

"This extraordinary autobiographical drama, which was performed impressively shortly after its publication, was apparently written some time before July 22, 1941, when O'Neill presented the manuscript to Carlotta, his third wife, with a letter paying tribute to her for the way in which she had helped him 'to face his dead at last and write this play—write it with deep pity and understanding for all the four hundred haunted Tyrones.' The Tyrones were the O'Neills—his father, his mother, the older son, himself. The father is the celebrated actor, the older son is a drunkard and ne'er-do-well. The only other character is Cathleen, a servant girl. A harrowing domestic tragedy, the play offers a clear insight into the character of O'Neill himself and shows again his eminence among American dramatists."

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962)

Michael Hollister (2015)